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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 001748

SIPDIS

DEPT PASS TO NEA/ARP FOR JHARRIS

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SA](#) [YM](#)

SUBJECT: NAJHRAN LOOKS FORWARD TO NEW GOVERNOR

REF: A. 06 RIYADH 8808

[B](#). 06 RIYADH 8671

[C](#). 00 RIYDAH 1365

[D](#). 00 RIYADH 1115

Classified By: DCM David Rundell for  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY: On November 4, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz issued a royal decree relieving Prince Mishaal bin Saud bin Abdulaziz from his duties as governor of Najran province at his own request. Contacts widely believe he was fired for his inability to manage relations with the Ismaili community. Riyadh's diplomatic community has increased scrutiny on Najran, located on Saudi Arabia's porous border with Yemen. Embassy contacts have shared reports of targeted arrests and lengthy detentions of Ismaili Shias in Najran. The King has not announced Mishaal's replacement, who will have the difficult tasks of securing the border and rebuilding relations with the Ismaili community. END SUMMARY.

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PRINCE MISHAAL'S NAJHRAN EXPERIENCE  
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[2](#). (C) Prince Mishaal was installed as governor of Najran in [1](#)1996. The son of former King Saud bin Abdulaziz and son-in-law of Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz, Mishaal built his reputation by leading a national guard unit that was among the first sent to defend the northern border during the 1991 Gulf War. His military expertise qualified him for the position in Najran - a remote, mountainous region facing numerous security challenges, including smuggling and illegal immigration. The possibility of terror cells crossing from Yemen into the kingdom constitutes a more serious threat. Tensions between the SAG and the Ismaili community have remained high since Mishaal's arrival as governor, peaking with riots in 2000 (Reftel C, D). Ismailis have accused the local government of harassment, discrimination and arbitrary arrest and detention. As a result, activists from Najran have petitioned King Abdullah to remove Prince Mishaal.

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WHO ARE THE ISMAILIS?  
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[3](#). (C) Ismaili Shia are also known as Shia "Seveners," or followers of Ismail ibn Jafar, whom they recognize as the Seventh Imam. The Saudi Ismaili population is estimated at between 250,000-450,000. The vast majority live in Najran. Saudis in general, including other Shia, are suspicious of the Ismailis and their brand of Islam. Some Saudis consider them heretics. Ismailis constitute the majority of Najran's population, although many in the community have converted to Sunni Islam over the years. The SAG has not ignored Najran.

King Abdullah was well received during a 2006 visit, when he announced new investment projects in the region (Reftel A). During that visit, the King pardoned a number of Ismaili prisoners. Currently, the most prominent Ismaili prisoner is Hadi al-Mutif, who has been imprisoned for blasphemy since 1994 (Reftel B).

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RECENT FIRST-HAND ACCOUNTS FROM NAJRAN  
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¶4. (C) Mission contacts have shared concerns over Najran in the past few months. These concerns include an alleged government-supported program to resettle Yemeni Sunnis to Najran, with the purpose of increasing the ratio of Sunnis to Ismaili Shia. An embassy human rights contact has described a pattern by the local government of removing Ismailis from civil service positions. He stated that Ismailis are offered transfers to a different part of the kingdom; when they refuse to relocate, they lose their job and are replaced by a Sunni. Dutch DCM Dr. Menno Lenstra visited Najran in late August, lodging with local Shia Ismaili contacts. He viewed the area of alleged Yemeni settlement and met with Ismaili Shias who shared stories of arrest and detention without charge. Lenstra considered the news of Mishaal's departure "very good for the Najran people."

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THE LAST TO KNOW?  
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¶5. (C) Governors answer to the Ministry of Interior (MOI) and  
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serve for renewable four-year terms. Mishaal's term was last renewed in April, 2005. A well-connected business contact, living in Khobar but originally from Najran, shared that Prince Mishaal had been told by Crown Prince Sultan that he would be extended in his position as governor of Najran for another four years. However, out of the blue, and in clear contradiction to the Crown Prince, King Abdullah removed Prince Mishaal from his post. The contact stated that he is very close to Prince Mishaal, as they share common business interests in Najran.

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COMMENT  
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¶6. (C) The SAG has not announced a replacement. The appointment is the King's prerogative, although MOI could make its own recommendations. The kingdom's thirteen governorships are ministerial-level positions and are filled by members of the royal family. The ability to confront the security issues along the Yemeni border will be critical in gaining the support of Deputy Minister of Interior Mohammed bin Naif (MBN). To succeed, Najran's leader must be able to govern the local Ismaili population and maintain stability. The fact that no replacement has been named could indicate internal disagreement over who will fill the role. The position of governor provides one of the kingdom's few true leadership opportunities, so competition among aspiring princes could be fierce.

¶7. (C) While not officially announced as a dismissal, our assessment is that Mishaal was removed for incompetence. In line with local custom, Najran's Ismailis will likely stifle their glee at Mishaal's departure and quietly await his replacement. The dismissal signals that the King recognized a problem. Mishaal could secure a higher position as a concession for relinquishing his governorship. This leadership change, while significant, does not mean immediate improvements for Najran's Ismailis, who will continue to battle their reputation as a suspect minority. END COMMENT.  
FRAKER